DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 488 CS 209 591

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TITLE Touchstones and Tradeoffs: Some Guidelines for Textbook Selection.
PUB DATE Oct 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference (St. Louis, MO, October 18-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; College Freshmen; Higher Education; Instructional Materials; *Textbook Content; Textbook Evaluation; *Textbook Selection; Textbook Standards; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Freshman Composition

ABSTRACT

Although there are many college freshman writing textbooks on the market, the selection of a textbook can be made simpler by following a number of guidelines. Teachers should examine textbooks they consider using to make certain the books contain the following elements: (1) appropriate readability for users; (2) textual features, such as self-help answers, for students; (3) comprehensive help on major sentence problems; (4) comprehensive help with punctuation problems; (5) a cliche section that offers a definition and a long list of cliches; (6) explanation of formal and informal outlining techniques; and (7) a systematic search procedure for library papers as well as a thorough discussion of plagiarism. Although no single textbook can fulfill every need, it is possible for teachers to supplement their texts with their own materials or with photocopied sections from other published materials. (DF)

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ED266488

Touchstones and Tradeoffs: Some Guidelines for Textbook Selection

by

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Touchstones and Tradeoffs:

Some Guidelines for Textbook Selection

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Abstract: In order to simplify the choice of a single college freshman writing textbook for Developmental English or regular rhetoric and for skills center book resources, an instructor can work up personal guidelines to check text usability by what is covered in a course or needed in a skills center. These guidelines should cover such aspects as readability, textual apparatus, including indexes and the like, major sentence errors, matters of usage and style and the coverage of study skills. Since no single text is all-inclusive, the instructor must then make tradeoffs in the final step of text selection for classroom or skills center. Instructors, of course, choose to supplement current texts or to write their own as well.

Since 1949 when I started teaching, I have seen one textbook honeymoon after another result in a divorce in a term or two. The problems with text selection are that no single text covers everything its users want it to and that the only true test of one is classroom or skills center usage over a period of time.

Before I continue, however, let me explain that by the term textbook, I mean any book meant to serve as a writing guide for college freshmen in required writing courses or as a writing reference. Now, since no such single work can be all-inclusive, text authors must make decisions about content and its treatment, which, in turn, inspire writing instructors to further decisions. And, with the ever-growing supply of texts, an instructor faces a formidible selection process. As a skills center writing specialist and instructor of Developmental Writing students of varying abilities, I face both the task of selecting an optional reference text for my students' personal use and appropriate skills center resources to meet their individual needs as well as the needs of referrals. For the former I wish to select as inexpensive a text as possible that still meets student needs; for the latter I wish to select useful materials that will cover a full range of writing problems without cluttering up our shelves with dust-collecting materials that waste time and money. Even so obvious a checkpoint as a recent copyright date can be misleading since, for example, 1984 and 1985 texts may still use 1977 MLA research paper documentation guidelines. Therefore, in the rest of this paper, I shall offer some personal touchstones or guidelines that I use to evaluate texts.

Guideline 1: Is the readability of the text appropriate

for its users? If a student cannot read a text, its information is useless. This is not the time to go into detail about readability. Instead, I refer you to my discussion of readability in my 1984 article in Teaching English in the Two-Year College, "Readability: The Bottom Line of Textbook Style." Readable texts need copious understandable examples. To illustrate, Steve, one of my advanced basic writers, thanked me last spring for a handbook that I had given him because, although he could not always understand the rules, he could apply its examples to his own writing problems.

Guideline 2: Does the text offer textual features that enhance its usefulness? First, does it offer self-help answers for students? I am convinced that one of the main reasons for the success of Teresa Ferster Glazier's The Least You Should Know About English series is such answers. Even the provision of some answers is better than none at all as in the Charles Merrill and John Langan texts. Next, does the text offer an index, and, if so, is the index adequate? Furthermore, are materials grouped in small units for maximum usefulness? A textbook that suffers from shortcomings on both of these points is The English Learning Center by Milton Hawkins, Marc Nigliazzo, and Virginia Stone. It lacks an index, combines fragments, run-ons, and comma-splices in a single lesson, and gives the same type of treatment to commas. Moreover, the exercises on sentence sense and commas amount to little more than a true-false guessing contest with no explanations of the correct answers. (Note: Also,

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for learning ease homonyms should be grouped in pairs, triplets, etc., not in arbitrary lists of twenty or so.)

Before continuing these guidelines, I wish to point out that I am not playing David Crystal's "new indoor sport" of nit-picking over usage points, outlined in the April, 1985 issue of English Today. I shall discuss some matters of usage in my guidelines, but I shall also cover matters of major sentence errors, style, study and thinking skills. To be useful, guidelines need to sample the complete scope of a text. You are welcome to select your own guidelines on usage as you choose. Now, on to the next guideline.

Guideline 3: Does the text offer comprehensive help on major sentence problems such as pronoun-antecedent agreement (including non-sexist guidelines), run-on and comma-splice sentences, and verb tense? Pronoun-antecedent agreement has become a minefield in recent years because of its implications of sexism in language. Therefore, I question the coverage of a book that does not deal with sexist language. The chart below contrasts effective and ineffective coverage of pronoun-antecedent agreement:

EFFECTIVE TREATMENT	INEFFECTIVE TREATMENT
Dougherty -Composing Choices for Writers: Acceptable treatment of agreement plus explanation, illustrations of sexism in language plus nine ways to avoid it. Gefvert-Confident Writer: Ten-page detailed treatment of agreement and sexist language.	Ruggiero-Composition: Dedicated to a woman but omits discussion of sexist language. Substitutes his or her in a single example and plural form in another. Fails to explain these. Biddle, Writer to Writer: Omits sexist language entirely.

The combination of run-on and comma-splice sentences is discussed earlier in this paper. It seems logical that such distinct problems should be treated separately. Surprisingly, however, Glazier does not separate them in her Least You Should Know series. On the other hand, comprehensive, separate treatments of these problems are offered in the ten-page discussion in Frederick Crews and Sandra Schor's Borzoi Handbook as well as in Carolyn Fitzpatrick and Marybeth Ruscia's Complete Sentence Workout Book which also includes answers.

Verb tense is a complicated area for most students that needs in-depth treatment. The chart below highlights verb tense treatment in a few ineffective and effective coverages in texts:

EFFECTIVE:	INEFFECTIVE:
Crews/Schor-Borzoi Handbook: Tense, sequence, perfect tenses, direct/indirect quotations, subjunctive mood, historical/literary tenses. Rules/explanations/examples/exercises). Webb/Tanner; A Writer's Plan: Outstanding chart showing all tense uses.	Glazier, Least You Should Know: Present/past/regular/irregular (selected),forms, Community Dialect (answers). Langan, English Skills: Same as Glazier above, ie. does not explain uses of perfect tenses. (answers).

Guideline 4: Does the text offer complete help with punctuation and similar problems? Before discussing this guideline, I wish to quote Eugene Hammond from Informative Writing: "The very mention of the word grammar triggers the association exception." The difficulty is knowing which exceptions to include along with the standard rules. Inadequate, not to mention inaccurate, statements about the use of the apostrophe lead to such problems as those

listed below:

PROBLEMS:	DEFICIENCIES:
Failure to treat "of" phrase	Markgraf-Punctuation: example: "grass's greeness" p. 97. Jones/Farness-College Writing Skills: "Is your essay's thesis clear. . . ?" p. 327.
Failure to distinguish between joint and individual possession	Hogins, Refreshing Grammar: Misleading rule that combines both. p. 280.
Offering option for rule of using 's for plurals of letters, numbers, symbols, words, ie. stating that the ' may be omitted.	Agee/Kline, Basic Writer's Book: pp. 421-22. Could lead to confusion in sentences such as the following: "Your word has too many i's in it."

In addition, the treatment of whether to spell numbers out or to use figures and the failure to distinguish between journalistic and academic uses of numbers drive students from one reference source to another. Rose Axelrod and Charles W. Cooper's St. Martin's Guide to Writing and Hogins' Refreshing Grammar offer such skimpy treatment and examples that a student is glad to find a comprehensive treatment such as that in the Prentice-Hall Handbook, 9th edition.

Guideline 5: Does the cliché section offer both a definition and explanation plus a fairly long list of clichés? The main problem here is that most students simply do not recognize clichés. Therefore, a two-paragraph explanation with five examples plus a suggestion to read widely to learn to recognize and avoid them as Gefvert offers in her Constant Writer does not solve students' problems. Much more effective is the approach of John and Francine Hardaway's Thinking into Writing which offers a seven-page treatment with a generous reference list. A similar approach should be used for glossaries of usage.

Guideline 6: Does the text cover both standard formal and informal outlining in all forms plus their uses? With its ties to summary and classification, outlining is a paramount skill for students. Additionally, with current emphasis upon teaching cognitive skills, it is vital that texts offer accurate information in outlining conventions. Examples of some effective and ineffective treatments of outlining are given below:

EFFECTIVE:	INEFFECTIVE:
Leggett/Mead/Kramer-Prentice-Hall Handbook, 9th ed.: Comprehensive treatment, pp. 317-20.	Ruggiero-Composition: Omitted.
Hodges/Whitten-Harbrace College Handbook, 9th ed., 1984 printing: Comprehensive coverage, pp. 448-51.	Dougherty -Composing Choices: Omitted.
	Gefvert-Confident Writer: Roman numerals used for introduction, conclusion, mixed topic-sentence types, pp. 96-102.

Guideline 7: If the text covers library papers, does it offer a systematic search technique for information and a complete discussion of plagiarism and how to avoid it by use of paraphrased notes, lead-in quotation tags, and quotation marks? Poor research papers come from poor advice such as being told to select a topic and work up a dozen or so preliminary bibliography cards from the "card catalogue, magazine indexes, and references in the library," as Mary Spangler and Rita Werner do in their Structured Essay. In addition, they tell the student to avoid plagiarism but not what it is and violate outlining conventions in their model student paper. Far more helpful are Vincent Ruggiero in Enter the Dialogue and Eugene Hammond in Informative Writing who both offer specific

detailed search techniques. Ruth Optner in her Writing from the Inside Out gives not only a research method but also directions for scanning magazines and books to find appropriate information. Moreover, Lloyd Shaw in Diana Hacker and Betty Renshaw's Writing with a Voice stresses a note-taking method to avoid plagiarism, shows plagiarized and paraphrased notes, and illustrates how to work quotations into research papers by using quotation marks and signal words in addition to offering an accurate student model paper.

These, then, are my very personal guidelines for coping with text selection. You might object that if they are followed, no single book can be chosen. Obviously, any time a single text is chosen, trade-offs are involved. A single text will always be inadequate. Experienced writers and writing instructors typically use resources not a text.

I routinely resort to multiple resources in student conferences and stress my use of such resources in my home office as well. In fact, I encourage my students to collect writing resources including the following items: an up-to-date college-adult dictionary, a rhetorical handbook, perhaps their high-school text, a thesaurus, and a World Almanac.

Many teachers choose not to make trade-offs in choosing texts or to supplement available texts. They produce their own texts, published or unpublished or use a combination of photocopied in-print books and their own materials. Teacher-authors who despair at ponderous tome-type texts write their

own brief Bibles. Regularly, these simplified texts expand with each new edition. For example, the lengths of successive editions of Elizabeth McMahan's Crash Course in Composition, Frederick Crews' Random House Handbook, and Martin and Kroitor's 500-Word Theme. Books written to overcome the shortcomings of other books are in turn the inspiration for yet more books produced to overcome their shortcomings. The cycle is never-ending!

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